

1. *Some symbols come into literature from a "shared language" of symbols:*

dawn = hope  
spring = youth

water = fertility  
autumn = aging

light = knowledge  
journeys/paths = life's journey

darkness = ignorance  
ETC!

# Symbols

2. *Some symbols have special personal meanings for a writer.*

In Robert Frost's poetry, flowers often symbolize his affection for his wife, Elinor; winter often symbolizes death; nature represents different aspects of human nature, etc.

4. *Symbols may be ambiguous.*

In Herman Melville's American classic *Moby Dick*, for example, the mythical white whale seems paradoxically double-faced. To the obsessed Captain Ahab, the whale stands for everything that is destructive in nature— and the whale does in the end send his ship and his crew to the bottom of the sea. But at other times, the whale seem to stand for everything that is most serenely beautiful in nature—as it floats through the calm sea, shedding "enticings."

3. *Literary symbols may be rich in associations.*

For example, an ancient symbol in Western culture is the garden. It brings with it a wealth of associations: The Garden of Eden was a scene of innocence and happiness, before the fall of Adam. The garden is a symbol of nature seen as fruitful and life-sustaining. Like the Garden of Eden, it may be the cultivated spot in the surrounding wilderness. It may suggest the oasis in the desert. It may suggest a retreat from the intrigues of office or business— we retreat there to "cultivate our own garden."

5. *Symbols acquire their full meaning in context.*

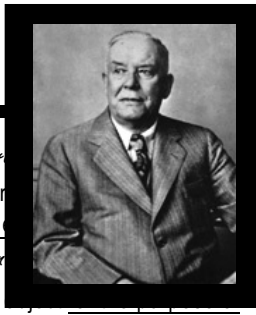
Hester's scarlet letter is a perfect example of how our perceptions and interpretations of the symbol change in the context of a story.

## *Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock*

The houses are haunted  
By white night-gowns.  
None are green,  
Or purple with green rings  
Or green with yellow rings,  
Or yellow with blue rings.  
None of them are strange  
With socks of lace  
And beaded ceintures. ◦ *Fancy sashes*  
People are not going  
To dream of baboons and periwinkles. ◦ *Cone-shaped snails*  
Only, here and there, an old sailor,  
Drunk and asleep in his boots,  
Catches tigers  
In red weather.

**WALLACE STEVENS**

*(American poet, 1879-1955)*



*How is a symbol different from an image?*

An **IMAGE** creates a concrete reference in the subjective world. A **SYMBOL** creates a concrete reference in the objective world which ALSO has another level of meaning. A symbol does NOT "stand for" the meaning; it suggests the meaning.

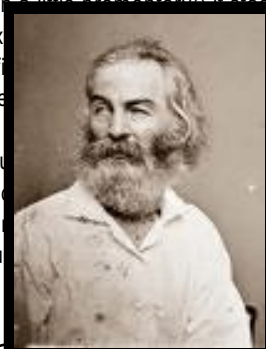
*How is a symbol different from a metaphor?*

A **METAPHOR** evokes an object which is illustrating an idea or demonstrating a quality. A **SYMBOL** evokes an object which embodies the idea or quality.

## *A Noiseless Patient Spider*

A noiseless patient spider  
I marked where on a little gossamer it stood isolated, *outcropping*  
Marked how to exult in the stretched loneliness  
It launched forth from itself, *standing*  
Ever unreeling there, *out of itself,*  
Ever unreeling them, *them.*

And you O my soul  
Surrounded, detached, *spheres of space,*  
Ceaselessly music-making the spheres to connect them,  
'Til the bridge you will no more tolerate, *ductile anchor hold,* easily bent  
'Til the gossamer is gone from your foot, *where, O my soul.*



**WALT WHITMAN**

*(American poet, 1819-1892)*

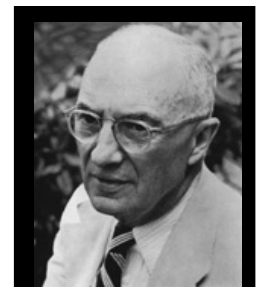
## *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*

Sorrow is my own yard  
where the new grass  
flames as it has flamed  
often before but not  
with the cold fire

that closes round me this year.  
Thirtyfive years  
I lived with my husband.  
The plumtree is white today  
with masses of flowers.  
Masses of flowers  
load the cherry branches  
and color some bushes  
yellow and some red  
but the grief in my heart  
is stronger than they  
for though they were my joy  
formerly, today I notice them  
and turn away forgetting.  
Today my son told me  
that in the meadows,  
at the edge of the heavy woods  
in the distance, he saw  
trees of white flowers.  
I feel that I would like  
to go there  
and fall into those flowers  
and sink into the marsh near them.

*WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS*

*(American poet, 1883-1963)*



## *Men at Forty*

Men at forty  
Learn to close softly  
The doors to rooms they will not be  
Coming back to.

At rest on a stair landing,  
They feel it  
Moving beneath them now like the deck of a ship,  
Though the swell is gentle.

And deep in mirrors  
They rediscover  
The face of the boy as he practices tying  
His father's tie there in secret

And the face of that father,  
Still warm with the mystery of lather.  
They are more fathers than sons themselves now.  
Something is filling them, something

That is like the twilight sound  
Of the crickets, immense,  
Filling the woods at the foot of the slope  
Behind their mortgaged houses.

*DONALD JUSTICE*

*(American poet, 1925-2004)*



## *Women at Thirty*

*After a poem by Donald Justice*

Women at thirty  
Learn to swing slightly  
In the hinges of their steps  
As they ascend.

At ease on the carpeting  
They feel it gliding  
Beneath them now like an air-borne sail,  
Though its speed is lowered down.

And deep in mirrors  
They recover  
The face of the girl as she tries on  
Her mother's smile and kisses

The face of that mother  
Still warmed by the mystery of father.  
They are more and more women now.  
Something is touching them, something

That is like the sun's brush  
Of white light, minute,  
Unfurling the ferns at the base of the yard  
Beyond their children's windows.

*MAURYA SIMON*

*(American poet, born 1950)*

